

Mexican Gray Wolf Translocation into the Gila Wilderness Area

Fact Sheet - March 20, 2000

What decision has been made on the translocation of wolves? The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Regional Director for Region 2 signed a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) on March 17, 2000, approving implementation of Alternative A in the February 10, 2000, Environmental Assessment (EA). The approved action is to translocate wolves throughout the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area (BRWRA) using temporary pens and limited public access restrictions while wolves occupy pens.

What environmental compliance requirements were completed by FWS to allow for this translocation? An EA of the translocation of previously released Mexican gray wolves within the BRWRA for management purposes was completed February 10, 2000. The EA was tiered to the 1996 Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) on the *Reintroduction of the Mexican Gray Wolf within its Historic Range in the Southwestern United States* which disclosed all anticipated environmental effects due to the presence of wolves throughout the BRWRA from a fully successful reintroduction program (i.e., a population of 100 wolves). A federal rule, under the authority of section 10(j) of the Endangered Species Act, designated the *Establishment of a Nonessential Experimental Population of the Mexican Gray Wolf in Arizona and New Mexico* (63 FR 1752; January 12, 1998) (50 CFR 17.84(k)) which provides for administrative and management flexibility under the ESA by relaxing prohibitions on take, and allowing for active management of wolves, including translocation of previously released wolves throughout the BRWRA for management purposes.

If the rule gives FWS the authority for translocation, why was an EA completed? Translocation of wolves is a management action discussed in general terms in the EIS and associated Notice of Record of Decision (ROD) and Statement of Findings. The EA provides a specific connection between the general terms used in the EIS and ROD to the specific language in the nonessential experimental population rule authorizing translocation. The EA addressed whether the action of translocation for management purposes creates significant new impacts beyond those analyzed in the EIS. The two years experience with the on-going reintroduction program formed the basis of this analysis. The resulting FONSI was signed March 17, 2000. The use of pen sites within the Gila Wilderness Area required a permit from the Gila National Forest, Wilderness Ranger District. The Wilderness District Ranger signed a Decision Memo March 20, 2000, allowing for immediate implementation of the proposed action.

What is the schedule for bringing wolves into the Gila Wilderness? Construction of the first wolf acclimation pen will be completed March 21. Wolves will be moved into the pen the following day and will be held there for up to 30 days. Following release, the wolves' movements will be monitored by an interagency field team. Translocation of a second pack is planned for the end of March.

How was the public included in this process? On January 14, 2000, FWS distributed a letter of intent to prepare the EA to approximately 1,000 interested members of the public. News releases were also distributed requesting input on wolf translocation. Many of the local affected parties and several special interest organizations were individually contacted. Scoping comments on the proposed action were accepted through February 4, 2000. A total of 728 scoping comments were received. The EA was completed on February 10, 2000. It was mailed to 718 persons, and made available to others at public hearings and from Gila National Forest offices. Two public hearings were conducted, one each in Reserve and Silver City, New

Mexico. The hearings were attended by more than 850 people, and oral testimony was heard from 127 people. Comments on the EA were accepted through March 15, 2000, and more than 9,000 comments were received.

How were these comments considered by FWS? Many strong opinions were voiced in support of and against the proposed action. The comment process is not a vote, but a search for facts and relevant issues. Comments were carefully considered for information or issues not previously considered in the EIS. Many of the issues raised were outside the scope of the EA; others did not present new information which would suggest the original analysis presented in the EIS was lacking or otherwise not accurate. Copies of all comments are on file within the Administrative Record maintained by the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program at FWS Southwestern Regional Office, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

What were the primary issues which were considered relevant to the decision on the EA.

Issue: Wolf impacts on wild prey. Response: Wolf prey abundance, as represented primarily by elk, remains stable and adequate to support wolves as described in the EIS.

Issue: Livestock depredation by wolves. Response: The number of actual depredation events by Mexican wolves over the first two years of the reintroduction program is consistent with the effects disclosed in the EIS.

Issue: Catron, Grant, and Sierra counties have local ordinances prohibiting release of wolves. Response: The ESA and Mexican wolf nonessential experimental population rule preempt conflicting local ordinances and resolutions.

Issue: Sampling protocols used in public opinion surveys reported in the EIS have been criticized. Response: These reports were referenced in the EIS as part of the information base available pertaining to wolf recovery in New Mexico. However, the analysis within the EIS and subsequent decisions were not based on the results of public opinion surveys, nor were referenced surveys conducted by FWS.

Issue: The Mexican wolves being released have been criticized as being “less than wild,” and as such, pose a greater risk to public safety than truly wild wolves. Response: Only captive-reared animals are available for reintroduction, however all release candidate wolves are raised and held in facilities where interaction with humans is absolutely minimized. These wolves are not domesticated or imprinted on humans. Wild wolf attacks on humans in North America are extremely rare and there are no verified human fatalities. No free-ranging, captive-reared Mexican wolf has been involved in an attack on a human.

Issue: The EA reported in error that there is no active livestock grazing permit over a large area of the Gila Wilderness. Response: This statement in the EA was in error. Though there are no cattle grazing permits in this area, there is a special use permit to allow an outfitter/guide service to graze up to 40 head of horses in the vicinity of two proposed translocation sites. Use of the translocation sites will be coordinated with the Forest Service and permittee to minimize potential impacts.

Why was the EA process completed so quickly? The purpose of translocation is to quickly respond to pressing management needs. Three reintroduced wolf packs have been recaptured for management purposes (two because of livestock depredation). Most of these animals are candidates for relocation, and two packs (Pipestem and Mule packs) have pregnant females. Translocating before denning and whelping facilitates wild adaptation of the pups and increases fidelity of the wolves to the translocation site.